

Who Is the Enemy?

By E. B. Sullivan

Brightness stabbed my eyes. I could no longer see.

Loudness pierced my ears. I could no longer hear.

The stench of burning flesh caused my body to swoon.

Intense heat melted my innocent hope.

Within minutes, a mushroom cloud hovered over my village. Its source killed my family, destroyed my home, and transformed my youthful being into an ancient one.

Suffocating rubble entombed me. I recoiled in disbelief, and no thoughts could comprehend the ramifications of this unthinkable deed.

I cried out, "Haha, Okaasan."

My mother did not answer.

Through the layers of debris, rough hands heaved away chunks of random materials. While freeing me from this dismal crypt, fingers probed my nonresponsive body, awakening my suspended soul.

My lips moved. "Has the world come to an end?"

The harsh reply cast me into a state of terror. "Alas, ours is finished."

From beneath my lids, a gray film obliterated all shades of color. My diminished sight searched for a blade of grass but couldn't find one. My fingertips groped for softness until they bled from contact with jagged shards of metal and glass. A constant bitter taste choked my cottonmouth. My breath gasped for fresh air. Dust hung like clumps of heavy snow on the branches of my lungs, making me cough and wheeze.

I longed to inhale the scent of a flower. My wobbly legs traveled through the ruins. In my path, grotesque caricatures masked ordinary faces, and mangled limbs dangled. The din of mournful groans chanted to an elevated pitch. To my horror, I realized blossoms and all things beautiful no longer inhabited my once familiar space.

Sometime later, aboard a ship smeared with filth, I sailed to Tokyo. Working along with a crowd of strangers, I attempted to do my part to restore our postwar nation. In the bustling city, I indulged in the luxury of bathing. Soon, I discovered no amount of water could wash away the vile atomic slime permeating my bones.

I contacted relatives, aunts, uncles, and cousins I had visited in previous years. My form yearned for their embrace, and my mind anticipated their welcome.

Their words sliced my heart through closed doors: “Our sorrow for your predicament overwhelms us. You understand, of course, we have young ones. It’s impossible for you to enter.”

Their fear that the poison was contagious justifiably turned me away. Unseen by them, I bowed in shame. “Forgive my foolishness.”

I traveled to the foothills of snow-capped Mount Fuji. To a significant degree, its remoteness spared the area from the outward signs of war. A scatter of fallen leaves decorated the landscape. Despite the chill in the air, the sight of vegetation calmed my grieving spirit. As I approached the family of my betrothed, an inner debate between naive beliefs and a sense of logic ensued. Disregarding wisdom, I pressed forward.

“It’s our responsibility to protect the interests of our son.” Their eyes lowered. “Under the circumstances, you are released from the contract made by your honorable deceased father.”

“Certainly,” I muttered shamefully.

At the boarding house, the females shared their stories. I listened in silence. With the others, I shed tears. I extended my shoulder to each.

“It is your turn.”

“Yes, we want to comfort you, too.”

Once these kind companions learned of my past, no woman showed me respect.

Like a shadow, I passed through the subsequent months. Unclean and damaged, I received the punishment of societal banishment. No one else divulged coming from Hiroshima or Nagasaki. None claimed the rancid islands as their home.

Salvation came to me through my studies. These consumed the unclaimed hours of my days. In isolation, I teased my mind with lofty philosophies and nurtured my heart with idealistic fantasies.

Through subtle prompts, the population nudged me farther away.

They told me, "Opportunities for your kind exist in America. There, your past will not be known."

In time, I saved the funds to purchase a transpacific liner ticket. Sheets of rain attached to rising waves pounded our vessel. My stomach sloshed. Dizzy and nauseous, I stayed in my bunk.

When the ship docked, I was pale, weak, and alone. My feet took small steps until they rested in front of the immigration desk.

"Your name," a male voice bellowed.

"Maka," I whispered. I peered into his eyes.

Like hot coals, his seared through me. "Your full name," he shouted.

"Maka Yodi."

With scores of other immigrants, I shuffled along. Herded into tents, we waited for further instruction. One by one, we received our assignments. Due to my education, I secured a better position than most. Segregated from most Americans, a Japanese ghetto became my new home. From experience, I kept my lips sealed regarding my background.

I worked in a large metropolis and could not avoid the natives. Many stared, while others turned away. My trembling form found it challenging to navigate the crowded streets. An inert paralysis competed with an urge to flee, causing me to move in choppy increments. Wild thoughts dominated. Perhaps in this throng walked the person responsible for creating, ordering, or dropping the annihilating bomb.

To calm my rioting mind, I spied glimpses of passing faces. Like a tsunami, a strong current of trepidation retreated for brief moments. Apprehension returned with a mountain of awareness.

My soul encountered a plethora of pain. In the name of war, these innocents lost their loved ones, too. Atrocious circumstances caused them to suffer. How could they not hate me? To them, I represented the Japanese Empire, the planes over Pearl Harbor, the battalions of troops hidden in island jungles, and cruel guards torturing their kin in sweltering prison camps.

I wanted to reassure them, provide them with solace, and have them forgive me.

Through the din of indistinguishable voices, I heard my own ask, "Who is the enemy?"

One answer reverberated, "We all are."